



September 20, 2026

~ *Matthew 20:1-16* ~

Bishop Ali Tote

Saskatchewan Synod

God's Grace That Never Lets Go

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We all know how children would often complain about a chore that they need to do, that it's not fair. When they're asked to stop watching TV or anything else of interest to them and do something else, the complaint will be that this is not fair. It's not just children who complain about being treated unfairly. We think it's not fair for a car to use the other lane to get to the zipper merge point ahead of us in a construction zone on the highway. We all believe as Canadians that the treatment we have been subjected to through the imposition of tariffs is not fair. There is something in all of us that wants life to be fair.

We want good people to be rewarded, bad people to get what they deserve, and everyone to receive exactly what they have earned. Fairness appeals to our sense of justice. But the Bible continually reminds us that God's reign is not built on fairness. It is built on grace.

The prophet Jonah knew this better than anyone.

Ironically, Jonah is perhaps the only prophet in Scripture who became angry because his preaching was successful.

God sent him to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a people known for violence, cruelty, and oppression. Jonah did not merely dislike the Ninevites. He hated them. He knew exactly what they had done to Israel and its neighbours. If anyone deserved God's judgment, it was them.

When Jonah finally entered Nineveh after his unforgettable encounter with the great fish, his sermon was remarkably short:

"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

There was no invitation. No altar call. No promise of forgiveness.

Yet something astonishing happened.

The people believed God.

From the king to the poorest citizen, everyone repented. They fasted. They put on sackcloth. They turned from violence.

And then we astonishingly hear in Jonah 3:10, *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed God’s mind about the calamity that God had said God would bring upon them.”*

Most prophets would have rejoiced.

Jonah did not. Instead, Jonah became furious.

Jonah prayed, *“Isn’t this exactly what I knew you would do? I knew that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”*

Notice what is happening.

Jonah quotes God’s own description of God’s own self from Exodus 34 which are words of praise throughout Scripture as well.

But Jonah throws them back at God like an accusation.

“You are too merciful.”

“You forgive too easily.”

“You let guilty people off the hook.”

Jonah’s problem was not that God lacked justice.

Jonah’s problem was that God had too much grace.

The irony is almost humorous, crazy.

Jonah had been rescued from drowning.

Jonah had received a second chance.

Jonah had received God’s unconditional love.

Jonah had experienced extraordinary grace.

But Jonah could not bear the thought that God would extend the same grace to someone else.

How often are we like Jonah?

We celebrate grace when it is given to us. We become uncomfortable when it is given to those we believe do not deserve it.

Yet today’s Psalm invites us to see God differently. *“The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” (Psalm 145:8)*

God’s grace is not simply something God does. It is who God is.

God delights in mercy.
 God delights in restoration.
 God delights in giving life.
 God delights in loving infinitely.

We often think grace means God forcing us onto the right path. But throughout Scripture, grace frequently looks very different.

Grace often means that God allows us to walk the road we insist upon, even when it breaks God's heart.

Jonah insisted on fleeing. God did not chain Jonah to the deck of the ship. God let Jonah run.

Israel insisted on demanding kings. God let them have kings.

The prodigal son insisted on leaving home. His father let him go.

Humanity has insisted again and again on trying life without God. God allows us that freedom and never walks away from us.

Jonah discovers God's unfailing presence in the belly of the fish.

The prodigal discovers it on the road home.

Israel discovers it in exile.

Peter discovers it after denying Jesus.

The disciples discover it after abandoning their Lord.

Again and again, God allows people to have their own way. But God is already waiting at the next bend in the road, ready to rescue. Even at the end of Jonah, God is still pursuing Jonah.

The story ends with Jonah sitting outside Nineveh, angry enough to die. God grows a bush to shade him. Then God allows it to wither. As Jonah mourns the plant, once again, God gently asks,

"Is it right for you to be angry?"

"Should I not be concerned about Nineveh?"

There is no answer from Jonah.

Will we rejoice when grace reaches the people we never imagined God could love? Or will we be resentful that God loves our enemies as much as God loves us?

Jesus tells essentially the same story in today's Gospel. Workers hired at five o'clock receive the same wage as those who worked all day. It feels unfair. And Jesus agrees.

It is not about fairness. It is about generosity and grace.

The owner asks, *“Are you envious because I am generous?”* (Matthew 20:15b)

Literally, in Greek, *“Is your eye evil because I am good?”*

The problem is not the owner’s generosity. The problem is the workers’ inability to celebrate another person’s blessing.

God’s reign does not operate according to merit. It operates according to the abundance of grace and God’s infinite love.

The Apostle Paul understood this as he sat in prison writing to the Philippians. *“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.”* (Philippians 1:21)

How could Paul speak with such confidence? Because Paul knew that whether in life or in death, Paul remained held by the grace of God. Nothing could separate him from God’s presence. Nothing could separate him from God’s rescue.

That same promise is ours to hold.

Perhaps today we feel like Jonah: angry, disappointed, unable to understand why God is so generous to others. Perhaps we feel like the workers who arrived early, certain that our faithfulness deserves more. Or perhaps we feel like the Ninevites, wondering whether our past has placed us beyond God’s mercy.

The good news is the same for everyone.

God’s grace is for all.

Wherever our choices lead us, God’s grace is already there, quietly waiting, patiently calling, faithfully rescuing.

As the psalmist sings:

“The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

That is who God was for Jonah. That is who God was for Nineveh. That is who God is for us.

And because we have been loved with such astonishing grace, we are free to become people of grace ourselves welcoming, forgiving, rejoicing whenever another sinner discovers that God’s mercy is wider than they ever imagined.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.